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ABSTRACT

The phenomenal growth in the use of the Internet over the past 5 years has revolutionized work tasks in hundreds of occupations. Counselors must adequately recognize the potential impact of the Internet on counseling and related professions, especially career counseling, and invest the energy necessary to make that impact positive because it appears the impact is inevitable. This chapter examines expectations the counseling profession might have about the Internet phenomenon and looks to the history of computer-based career planning systems for relevant questions they might ask. It also explores the hopes counselors have for the expansion of counseling and guidance services to a large and geographically distributed population in need of services through the use of distance technology. Noted are challenges that should be foremost in counselors' minds. Some of these challenges include the quality of Web sites; interaction with clients "on-line"; and counselors who will work with clients in technology-driven modes. The chapter concludes by proposing several possible ways to take the next steps in developing ethics and standards of quality as well as engaging in new areas of counselor training and research. (MKA)

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The Internet: Blessing or Bane for the Counseling Profession?

JoAnn Harris-Bowlsbey

The phenomenal growth in the use of the Internet in the past 5 years has revolutionized work tasks in hundreds of occupations. Consider the impact of the Internet on book stores, real estate agencies, travel agencies, banks, institutions of higher education, libraries, and retail stores, to name just a few affected occupational settings. Counselors must also adequately recognize the potential impact of the Internet on counseling and related professions—especially career counseling—and invest the energy necessary to make that impact positive because it appears that impact is inevitable.

This chapter examines expectations we might have as a profession about the Internet phenomenon and looks to the history of computer-based career planning systems for relevant questions we might ask. Further, it notes challenges that should be foremost in our minds and concludes with possible solutions for managing this transition.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The Internet offers the profession an impressive array of possible blessings, including most obviously, the potential to reach immensely greater numbers of clients with counseling and information services. Currently, 50% of American homes have access to the Internet either because homeowners have paid an access fee through a commercial service provider or because they have ac-

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quired Internet service free or for a reduced charge through a library or educational institution. Another significant percentage has gained Internet access through their place of employment. Public libraries have acquired the hardware and connections, thanks, in part, to a billion dollar gift from the foundation of Microsoft's chair, Bill Gates, resulting in provision of free access to their clientele. If Gates' predictions in *The Road Ahead* (1996) come true, there will be a continuing decline in the cost of hardware and access to the Internet, making its use in American homes as common as that of the television set. Thus one great expectation has been that the Internet will quickly become a universally available highway, with affordable tolls, over which to send and receive assessment, information, and counseling support.

I am fortunate to have been one of those very early developers, in the late 1960s, of computer-based career planning systems. In the early years, I predicted that by 1987, 80% of American homes would have computers, and along with other early developers, I dreamed about the possibility that computer-based career planning systems would have early, wide, and almost universal acceptance. As a matter of fact, that did not happen.

Another logical expectation was that counselors, and those who manage counseling services, would add the Internet as an additional powerful tool to their quiver of services, as they did earlier with assessment and computer-based systems. As a young developer of computer-based systems, I had this expectation as well. However, what I learned in 1968, and continue to learn in 1999, is that a large proportion of counselors still do not embrace technology with open arms. Embracing it means having interest in technology, possessing a set of skills to deal with it, and having the imagination to develop modes of providing service that combine high touch and high tech. My sense is that for many warm, caring individuals with the mean Holland code of SEA (social, enterprising, and artistic), the embracing of technology remains foreign and uncomfortable!

In the 30 years that have rolled by since the release of the first computer-based career planning systems, there has been increasing acceptance of technology and, for some, the development of skills to use it effectively. Perhaps this history has laid a foundation that

will allow the acceptance and productive use of the Internet to advance at a much faster pace.

Yet another logical expectation has been that individuals who take advantage of technology-driven services will enjoy positive effects from their use. These include increased self-efficacy, improved decision-making skill, easier identification of alternatives available in given situations, and better-informed decision making because of the world of information at their fingertips.

Thirty years of using computer-based systems have indeed had positive effects including increased self-efficacy and increased decision-making skill, increased awareness of the need to plan ahead and increased knowledge about specific occupations, and greater specification of career goals (Taber & Luzzo, 1999). However, these effects have not accrued at the rate or magnitude of early expectations.

Still another expectation about the use of the Internet and other computer-driven technologies has been that the role of the counselor can and will improve for the better. In this case, *better* means that highly trained professionals can be freed from routine tasks such as schedule changing, information dissemination, and report generation so that the saved time can be used to meet with clients and address specific problems that a computer cannot serve well. Though this has been a persistent expectation since the beginning of the use of technology in guidance, there is very little evidence that this expectation has been met.

Are there Internet characteristics that make these expectations more likely to come true than has been the case with stand-alone and networked computer-based systems? Perhaps. First, the Internet has an uncanny appeal at this time in history, and many are inclined to think the Internet is good simply because of its snowballing track record. Second, Internet services on the whole remain free of charge, whereas the high cost of developing, maintaining, and marketing earlier computer-based systems, combined with their limited market, resulted in relatively high annual user fees. Third, Internet capabilities are far more expansive, both in the sense of their outreach and in the sense of their nature, which includes use of multimedia, e-mail, video conferencing, transmission of databases, and multiple linkages to other rich resources on the Internet.

GREAT QUESTIONS

The history of computer-based systems and the capabilities of the Internet combine to help us formulate the questions that we, as a profession, need to be asking. If we can formulate the really relevant questions, we are much more likely to be able to find answers for them. Here are the ones I want to pose:

- Do we believe that parts of our work with clients who present different kinds of problems and concerns can be handled as effectively utilizing technology as we currently do with traditional face-to-face interventions? If so, what concerns should be matched with which technological interventions?
- If we can design technology-driven activities and services to perform those tasks, how will we use the time that is saved—to serve more clients, to provide more in-depth assistance to the ones we are already serving, or to take on more tasks that are at the periphery of our calling?
- Assuming that some tasks can be defined that the computer does as well or better than we humans do, how should human counselors support or provide follow-through for those tasks?
- Knowing that individuals have different learning styles, different levels of readiness for receiving counseling services and information, and differing levels of acceptance of technology, how will we identify clients for whom providing services in a technology-driven way will be a disservice, or at best a waste of resources, until issues have been resolved that serve as barriers?
- In a cyberworld where free is considered to be good, how do we develop and sustain high-quality services for which little or inadequate revenue is being generated?
- How do we recruit counselors and counselor educators (whose basic personality type draws them to work with people in real-time, face-to-face, empathic ways) who have skills in program or web site design so that the materials we use are developed by individuals with appropriate credentials and so that programs of service are developed that move between technology and human support in seamless and complementary ways?
- How do we change the curriculum of preservice and in-service education for counselors to provide training in use of technology,

both as cognitive content and as an area in which there is a practicum?

- How do we evaluate services that combine technology and human support? Over the years we have found it extremely difficult to define the outcomes we desire, construct instruments or methods to measure them, and get enough researchers and subjects to apply this measurement. As subjects in cyberspace are more difficult to identify and research, and even more difficult under distance conditions, how will we succeed in knowing if services are improved or denigrated through incorporation of technology?

Though it is likely that there are many more questions that could be asked, these are central and sufficient to occupy our attention in the short range.

GREAT CHALLENGES

Assuming that we could find good answers to the questions just posed, the profession's entry into virtual counseling will still be fraught with tremendous challenges. There are specific challenges for the development and quality of web sites, for clients, and for counselors.

In the development of web sites, the challenges relate to disjointedness and quality. Though there are hundreds of web sites that provide some assistance or information related to topics in the purview of guidance, these sites are entirely disjointed. There is no master plan that has organized guidance services in some way and then addressed the components in detail. The typical client is unable to sequence the pieces (such as taking an interest inventory before selecting titles of occupations for which to get descriptions, or using an activity to determine the criteria desired in a job before searching an extensive job bank) and is thus faced with a smorgasbord of possibilities that have no known sequence or relationship to one another. At this stage of the development of guidance activities and information on the Internet, a client needs a knowledgeable counselor to identify helpful sites and to help the client apply their content to the decision making at hand.

Professional standards related to quality for web site development and use of these sites with clients are just emerging. With a

few notable exceptions, professionals are not reviewing sites against criteria; and no professional organization is acknowledging sites with a seal of approval. With the exception of sites developed by college and university counseling and career centers, most sites are being developed by individuals or organizations that do not possess expertise in our field. The myriad of web sites have widely varying quality, and there is no way to help the consumer decide which are worthy of time and attention.

The second group of challenges relates to interaction with clients. Because users of web sites or cybercounseling are typically not in face-to-face contact with a counselor, it is difficult to assess the readiness or capability of a client to profit from technology-driven service. The guidelines adopted by the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC, 1998; see Appendix 5) state that a counselor must talk with a potential client by phone in order to assess this readiness. Guidelines adopted by the National Career Development Association (NCDA, 1997; see Appendix 6) indicate that the counselor must do periodic monitoring of the client's progress by telephone or videophone teleconference. Phone conversation may be helpful. Use of video conferencing, at a time when it is more commonly available for all, may be more effective because some nonverbal cues will also be available. The same guidelines indicate that it is unethical for a counselor to provide cybercounseling to a person whom he or she assesses as unlikely to profit from treatment in this mode and that the client should be referred to a geographically close counselor for face-to-face counseling.

It is difficult at best, even when counseling is being provided face-to-face, to evaluate its effectiveness or the degree that it has helped clients meet goals that they and the counselor have mutually set. This problem is exacerbated in cyberspace. The relationship with the client is tenuous and electronic, and it is easier to terminate in midstream. The goals set for the relationship are restricted. In a service mode that is badly in need of evaluation, the chances for success are significantly lower than in face-to-face mode.

Another difficulty related to the client is that we know far too little at this time about how to provide cybercounseling or simply hu-

man support to activities completed or information gained via the Internet. We do not know whether synchronous or asynchronous e-mail interaction is more effective, whether addition of audio and/or video to counselor-client interactions makes them more effective, or whether individuals with different personalities or learning styles are more likely to profit from assistance in this mode than others.

The third group of challenges relates to counselors who will work with clients in technology-driven modes. We do not know what the ideal Holland or Myers-Briggs Type Indicator code is for an effective cybercounselor. Because we do not know this person's characteristics, selection criteria at the preservice training level may be inadequate or incorrect. Clearly, those who specialize in cybercounseling need preservice and in-service training that is significantly different from that needed by those who specialize in traditional, one-to-one counseling. How can those who need to change counselor education programs acquire a sufficient level of knowledge to be able to do so? How does a cybercounselor achieve a positive, trusting relationship with a client? How do techniques such as reflection, questioning, and encouraging translate into e-mail communication? How are important tasks such as problem identification and goal setting accomplished in a technology-driven context?

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Many challenging questions and needs have been raised, and with the speed at which technology is moving, we as a profession need to find answers and solutions quickly. Here are some of my ideas about ways in which useful solutions could be identified.

It seems critically important that the American Counseling Association and its related entities should take the lead in facing and finding solutions to these challenges. A first task is to expand the ethical guidelines that have to date been developed by the National Career Development Association, the National Board for Certified Counselors, and the International Association of Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG). Though these guidelines together form a very good basis, they are not yet complete or sufficient. By means of an appointed task force with broad representation, ACA

could further develop these guidelines and publicize them broadly to its own members, schools and universities, publishers of material in the field, and the general public. Further, the association could be mindful of legislation that needs to address a variety of ethical concerns related to the Internet and could promote wording that addresses those concerns.

A second task for ACA and its collaborating entities is to develop more comprehensive and definitive standards for web sites that are used for cybercounseling or guidance and career information. These standards need to include

1. requirements related to the credentials of developers and a requirement that developers must state their credentials;
2. the methods of screening clients who will be supported by distance technology;
3. characteristics of assessment instruments whereby results can be released directly to clients without counselor intervention;
4. methods and criteria for referral of cyberclients to on-site counselors; and
5. methods by which counselors will support clients at a distance.

Standards should also include specifications for user interface, response time, use of multimedia assets, and confidentiality of records. Given the immensity of this task, it might be organized from one source that can delegate specific parts of the task to entities within the whole having the greatest expertise in these parts.

Once standards for quality web sites are developed, the professional associations should develop a structure for reviewing them in order to rate them—or to certify them or not certify them—as quality sites. Further, ACA and its entities should mount a publicity campaign to inform developers about the standards, to inform consumers about them, and to attempt to enforce the standards.

These kinds of activities will help solve the problems of development, critical review, and certification of web sites and services in our field. They do not address the problem of getting a broad base of the current and future members of the profession trained to work effectively in cyberspace. Solving this challenge requires changes in preservice and in-service counselor education programs. The curriculum required for training in counseling must be re-

viewed and expanded to include the new technologies. Experiences provided through supervised practicum need to include cybercounseling and use of web sites in conjunction with one-to-one and group modes of service.

Changing counselor education curriculum is a significant challenge. Though many institutions of higher education are optimally equipped from a technical point of view to deliver instruction in distance-learning modes, one nagging problem has been to get faculty members comfortable in developing courses in this mode and in providing student learning experiences in a very different way. If this is true of faculty members in general, it may be doubly true of counselor educators. Faculty members entered their profession because of a love of dealing directly with students. They are unlikely, especially if beyond the age of 30, to make an easy transition to the cyberworld. In order to change this scene it may be necessary for accrediting bodies or curriculum-approval organizations to require changes in curriculum and in modes of delivering that curriculum.

Just as counselor training programs currently offer specialties in mental health counseling, school counseling, family counseling, and the like, they should also offer a specialty in technology-enhanced counseling. It will be critical that at least one faculty member in the department be knowledgeable and enthusiastic in this area, that students experience some of their own mentoring and course work in this medium, and that they have supervised practicum in cybercounseling and guidance.

These thoughts trigger others about the selection of students into counselor training. Those who will succeed best in cybercounseling and guidance are likely to have different personality characteristics than those who favor and succeed in face-to-face counseling. It is likely that this new breed of counselors have Holland codes of RSE (realistic, social, enterprising) or ISE (investigative, social, enterprising), and thus different ways need to be developed to attract and select these candidates.

Similarly, vigorous attention should also be given to in-service training of counselors. Because those who are certified or licensed have to maintain continuing education, there could be an additional requirement that some of this training be in the area of delivering service by technology. That, of course, begs for the devel-

opment of this curriculum, which might be optimally delivered as web-based training in order to introduce counselors to this medium.

I have spoken of the responsibilities of professional associations, certifying and accreditation bodies, and institutions of higher education in helping the profession to use new technologies ethically and effectively. There is also a significant role for government agencies and other funding sources. Because the norm has been set that most services are free of charge on the Internet, tremendous funding is needed for development of high-quality web sites. It is impossible to develop high-quality services and maintain them without a revenue flow. At the beginning of computer-based career guidance systems, for example, there was very significant funding from state and federal sources and from charitable foundations. The revenue flow for web counseling and guidance has to come only partially from client fees and largely from external funding and perhaps some advertising of products we feel comfortable listing for our consumers. Funding could also support the revision of counselor education curriculum and aggressive in-service training—a model that was forged in 1958 with funding from the National Defense Education Act, which provided training for a generation of counselors.

External funding should also be used for research in this field. As already mentioned, research related to the optimal combination of types of service, characteristics of those who will profit from these methods, and effectiveness of cybercounseling and guidance will be both difficult and expensive. It will be more cost-efficient if a large-scale research program can be coordinated from one source rather than having multiple, small research studies.

These methods combined might make an important impact on the need to develop standards, monitor web sites, train and retrain counselors, and conduct research in this new method of service delivery. Another method that might be extremely useful at this time could be a summit conference to which professionals knowledgeable in these technologies were invited for a think-tank activity of several days. Such an activity could be structured in a way that focused major attention on these and other crucial issues and developed a summary of best thinking on these matters as well as a suggested plan for future action.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has reviewed some of the expectations and hopes that we hold for the expansion of counseling and guidance services to a large and geographically distributed population in need of them through the use of distance technology. At the same time, it has reviewed the challenges of making this leap into cybercounseling and guidance and some of the critical questions that the profession should be asking. Finally, it has proposed some possible ways to take the next steps in developing ethics and standards of quality and engaging in new areas of counselor training and research.

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